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THE STRIKE PROBLEM UPON ELECTRIC RAILWAYS

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That something must be wrong in an industry where every year about one-third of the employes give up their work or are discharged is an unavoidable conclusion. This is the condition prevailing on all street railway systems in large cities. Every year these companies are compelled to employ and train from twenty-seven to thirty-three per cent of new men.

The reasons for this condition are obscure. The principal reason cannot be the prevailing rate of wages, for the *yearly* earnings of motormen and conductors, who average twenty-three cents an hour for about ten hours a day, are more than the yearly earnings of the most skilled trades-workers. The latter's wage rate per hour is, of course, higher, but employment on urban electric railways is steady throughout the year, while irregularity of employment is the rule among skilled workers. As nearly as the writer can discover, not more than half of the men who employ as motormen and conductors intend to make this work their permanent calling. Car service seems to be regarded as a makeshift until "a better job" can be obtained. The conditions of employment, the hours of labor, constant friction with the public, and, in short, the annoyances of platform duty appear to make it an undesirable employment from the viewpoint of the workingman.

Under such conditions, without the *esprit de corps* found among steam railway workers and the feeling of common interest that exists only among permanent employes, it is inevitable that labor disturbances, critical or subdued, rather than peace, should characterize the relations of street railway companies and their army of motormen and conductors.

I

The recent conflict between the street railway company and its employes in the city of Philadelphia affords an opportunity to study the trend and results of labor disturbances in all their phases. The

great strike of February-April, 1910, had its source in the discharge of forty Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company employes in November, 1908. These men were removed from the service for "pernicious activity" in the attempt, then seriously begun, to unionize the company's 6500 motormen and conductors. Through the intervention of the mayor of the city in their behalf, the discharged men were reinstated upon their promise that their efforts at organization should not be, as they had been, a disorganizing force among the company's men and destructive of the discipline which is absolutely necessary in the operation of a railway.

These promises were not kept to the company's satisfaction. Organization of the men slowly continued, and on May 28, 1909, a mass meeting was held and a strike called. Just how many of the employes voted for this strike cannot be ascertained, but the officials in charge of the affairs of the union at that time subsequently told the writer that they had less than 425 paid-up members. Notwithstanding this, two-thirds, or four thousand five hundred, of the motormen and conductors went out on strike. The writer was in a position to know that very few of these men voted to strike or wanted to strike, but they would not work after a strike had been declared, and so run the risks and incur the odium that falls to the lot of the "scab." These facts may well be considered by street railway managers who comfort themselves with the belief that their men cannot be called out because they are not organized.

After a strike lasting seven days an agreement was reached as to the terms upon which the men should return to work. They had demanded the abolition of the "swing-run system," a three-cent-an-hour increase in wages; that they should be free to buy their uniforms from at least one union firm, and that grievances should be adjusted at regular meetings with "accredited representatives" of the employes. The company conceded the first demand, refused the increase of pay, specified five firms, one union, from which uniforms might be bought, and agreed to meet representatives of the men for the adjustment of grievances—the term applied to all complaints regarding discharges and suspensions.

An agreement was drawn up between the company, as party of the first part, and the "accredited representatives" of the employes, party of the second part. These accredited representatives were elected by the union employes of the company's nineteen barns,

or operating depots. They were all known to be union men, but signed the agreement simply as individuals, and not as representatives of Local 477, which is the Philadelphia branch of the Amalgamated Association of Street and Electric Railway Employes of America.

Under this agreement, which was finally brought about largely because of political pressure applied to both the men and the company, labor relations were maintained with surface friendliness for a period of about five months. In the fall of 1909 an upheaval occurred within the union, seven of the original "accredited representatives" were expelled and complaints were made that the company was violating the June agreement by meeting, for the adjustment of grievances, a committee composed of employes other than those who had signed the agreement. It was then claimed, for the first time, that there could be no conferences or relations between the company and its men except those carried on through the accredited representatives, or their successors, who represented the union element.

The committee to which objection was made by the union represented about two thousand five hundred members of the "United Carmen's Association," commonly called the "Keystone Men." The Amalgamated Association claimed that this was an outlaw organization, fostered by the company, and that there was gross discrimination by company officials in favor of the Keystone men, tending to disrupt and destroy the Amalgamated local. The Keystone men were mainly those who had remained loyal during the May-June strike; they were hated by the Amalgamated officials, and were always ostracised and not infrequently assaulted and terrorized by the more radical union element. It was insisted that these loyal men had no right to recognition in any form. This was the issue which really brought about the strike of 1910.

The company flatly refused to give exclusive recognition to the accredited representatives of the Amalgamated union, and this being insistently urged by the latter, conferences were arranged in January for the purpose of coming to a better understanding. At this time it was charged by the company, and became evident to every street-car rider, that breaches of discipline were the rule rather than the exception among the union carmen, who were easily identified by a button one and one-half inches in diameter worn by them. The

company's officials were flooded with complaints concerning incivility and other improper acts, which seemed to establish the presumption that the Amalgamated motormen and conductors were deliberately proceeding upon the theory that the more enemies they could make for their employer, the better their chances would be to bring the company to terms.

Unionism among Philadelphia carmen was a new thing. To many of them it spelled nothing more than freedom from discipline. Most of the union leaders tried to correct this misapprehension; they disclaimed responsibility for the insubordination of their followers, and frequently told the men at their meetings that they would lose instead of gain public support by the acts of which the company and the riding public bitterly complained. But in this and in other respects the leaders were unfortunate in having little control over their men. The organization, in short, suffered from the weaknesses of most labor organizations newly conscious of power and wholly mistaken and misled as to the best methods of achieving their aims. In fairness to the men it should be set down that their misconception of the attitude of the public toward their plan of campaign was largely the result of a false analysis of what they saw daily in their work. In Philadelphia, as elsewhere, the street railway employe feels and reflects the dissatisfaction of the public with the inevitable inconveniences and discomforts of street-car transportation. The men concluded from the grumbling and ill-temper of the riding public that it would countenance any course upon the part of the men, no matter how extreme. This mistake has been made many times in the last few years. To overlook this factor is to ignore one of the greatest difficulties with which street railway managements have to deal.

Efforts toward a better understanding were not helped by the adoption of a strike resolution on January 18th. This action was taken on a ballot which set forth that the company had violated the June agreement by receiving more than one grievance committee, and was attempting to destroy the union by discriminating against its members. There was some truth in the latter assertion. Subordinate officials of the company, such as division and street superintendents, in many cases favored the men who were loyal to the company as against those who were disloyal and troublesome and whose first allegiance was paid to the union rather than to the com-

pany. No number of general orders that all men should be treated alike could change this condition of affairs so long as the union man refused to work faithfully and in harmony with the non-union element.

The strike vote did not frighten the officers of the company, as the men evidently expected. They continued to refuse acquiescence in or even to discuss the proposition urged by the union that employes should be free to join but one organization, namely Local 477 of the Amalgamated, and that the company should have no dealings with any other body of its employes.

The company proposed that the agreement be modified by the insertion of the following clause:

Employes shall be free to join or not to join any organization and may present their grievances to the company individually, or, if members of any organization of employes, by a committee or the representatives thereof, and there shall be no intimidation or discrimination against any employe so doing by any official of the company or their subordinates.

This amendment at once became the crucial point in the negotiations. The principle it expressed is one that street railway managements must always insist upon and which the Amalgamated Association will always oppose, unless its policy is radically changed. The Amalgamated, as its officers repeatedly told the writer, cannot enter into any agreement which recognizes the existence of any other labor union, and this would be done if the Amalgamated, or any one representing it, signed an agreement containing the proposed clause.

The Amalgamated's policy, as it has been expounded by its highest officials, is first to secure the unhampered right of organization; then to bring into its membership the great majority of the employes of a system, and then, finally, to make an issue of the closed shop and of wage questions.

The sad experience of the street railway companies in San Francisco, Detroit, Cleveland and Pittsburg, which permitted this procedure, has convinced railway managers that the principle of the open shop must be maintained at all hazards. Once thoroughly organized and able to confront an operating company with a total suspension of service, the union is able to force wages up to a point higher than the earnings will bear. Dealing with the Amalgamated Association is, furthermore, very different from dealing with the conservative and ably led organizations which include the various

classes of steam railway employes. The street railway union suffers from the existence of the floating and irresponsible element quite as much as do the railways. It is therefore easy to understand why unionism is invariably resisted by electric railways while it is taken as a matter of course by steam railway managements.

The negotiations preceding the Philadelphia strike reached a complete deadlock, as already indicated, over the question of the exclusive recognition of the Amalgamated Association. It was evident that the men would sign almost any agreement, even including the sliding scale, which is so objectionable to them, provided they could obtain recognition of the union and the exclusion of any other body of employes from relations with the company. When it became evident that this would not be conceded by the company, the conferences were abandoned. Unrest and insubordination increased among the union element, and the crisis was reached when the company, on February 18th, discharged 174 men for various offenses, including intoxication, failure to register fares, disobedience of orders, and the harassing of non-union men.

These discharges were in the nature of an accumulation. Very few discharges had been made by the company during the conferences of January and February for the reason that the company did not wish to render a situation, already full of ill-feeling and antagonism, more acute. After the strike I acted as arbitrator of these cases, and recommended the reinstatement of 76 of the 174 discharged men. This recommendation, which was accepted by the company, was based not upon a showing that the discharges were unjustified, but upon representations that the men reinstated would not give further cause for offense. The men reinstated were mainly those who had good working records, but who had been active in harassing non-union men.

When, however, the union officials heard of these discharges they announced that the company had declared a lockout. It was stated that the leaders believed that 600 or 700 men had been discharged. Instead, however, of waiting to find out what were the facts, a strike was called February 19th at one o'clock in the afternoon, under the authority given to the local leaders by the vote of January 18th. In the strike order every union man was instructed to turn in his car upon reaching the barn "and allow it to remain there until the company will sign an agreement with us, guaranteeing

twenty-six cents an hour, and protecting us in our rights to belong to a union without being unjustly discriminated against."

Thus began a nine-weeks' struggle which cost the Rapid Transit Company \$2,395,000; cost the city many millions more, and resulted in the loss of a score of lives. The men lost about \$800,000 in wages. No one gained anything.

On April 25th, 3,400 of the 4,800 men who had gone on strike returned to work at the wage offered at the beginning (twenty-three cents an hour, increasing to twenty-five cents for men who remain in the service until 1914), without an agreement of any kind with the company, and having lost their seniority in the service.

That no basis of settlement could be reached after the strike had begun was due to the fact that the company would not submit to arbitration what it considered to be "inalienable rights." Its position was set forth in a letter to a body of clergymen who had urged the board of directors to arbitrate the matter in dispute. This letter said in part:

"There are but two real questions at the bottom of this strike:

"1. The right of our employes to deal directly with us without the intervention of an organization officered and controlled by outside men; and

"2. The right of this company to have the same freedom in hiring and discharging men that the men have in staying with or leaving the company.

"These rights are fundamental and inalienable and do not submit themselves to any form of arbitration. To surrender them to any outside interest would be to abrogate the management of the corporation, which duty the law imposes upon us as directors."

Terms offered from time to time by the company were either formally rejected by the men or refused informally by their leaders because they did not include exclusive recognition of the union, or, as the men put it, protect them in their union rights. The contest, it is evident, was one in which both parties preferred ruin to the sacrifice of what each considered to be a vital principle.

II

Into this struggle was introduced a comparatively unused weapon, at least so far as the United States is concerned, in the form of a sympathetic or general strike.

Mr. C. O. Pratt, leader of the carmen, has represented this movement as both justifiable and successful.¹ As to whether or not it was justifiable, opinions differ. To the average mind the sympathetic strike appears to be a contradiction of every principle of right, justice, and expediency. If a labor contract in the building trade, for example, scrupulously observed by the employer, is to be broken by the employes because the street railway men go on strike, then labor contracts are comparatively useless. Mr. Pratt enlarges upon the solidarity among unionists which he thinks was brought about by the Philadelphia sympathetic strike, but he fails to consider how many tolerant, half-converted, and even friendly employers were convinced, by that strike, that fair dealing and good faith cannot be expected from trades unions. The greatest advance the trades union propaganda could make would be to secure the general acceptance of the principle of collective bargaining as to conditions of employment. This is impossible if relations are rendered unstable by general or sympathetic strikes.

As to the success of the Philadelphia sympathetic movement, there is not so much room for honest differences of opinion. Its beginning, course and effect can be briefly summarized:

On February 27th, the ninth day of the carmen's strike, a meeting of the Philadelphia Central Labor Union, comprising 127 locals, was held, and resolutions passed providing that if arbitration of the car strike was not brought about by March 5th, a general strike would be ordered. The resolutions stated that the general strike was a protest against the wrongs committed by the company and by the city authorities in its behalf, and "We pledge ourselves not to return to work until all rights have been recognized and complied with."

The car strike was not settled by arbitration or otherwise within the time limit set by the resolutions, and a general sympathetic strike was accordingly called, to become effective March 5th. The announcement was then made that "75,000 organized workers had quit their various employments in this city, to remain on strike until the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company grants arbitration or effects a settlement with its striking employes."

It is impossible to say how many men and women went out

¹Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, Vol. XXXVI, No. 2.

under the general strike order. The Committee of Ten in charge of the strike issued grossly exaggerated estimates, running as high as 140,000. The police reports indicated that perhaps 35,000 strikers were out for a week, but the number steadily decreased after the first few days of the strike, until on March 27th, when the strike was formally called off, only a few thousand strikers were out. Some industries, notably the textile mills, were affected by the strike; but the life of the city as a whole was not seriously disturbed. As far as the transit company was concerned, it did not feel the effect of the sympathetic strike in any way. Judged either as a means of bringing the company to terms or as a demonstration of the solidarity and coercive power of organized labor, the strike was an absolute failure.

Upon this point the contemporary statements and opinions of the daily press are unanimous and conclusive. In its issue of March 16, 1910, the twelfth day of the strike, the Philadelphia "Record" said:

The general strike has already been demonstrated to be a futile as well as a senseless weapon for the coercion of the corporation against which the warfare was originally directed.

The Philadelphia "Press" of March 28th, the day following the termination of the strike, said editorially:

The sympathetic strike . . . never took a strong hold on the majority of the men appealed to . . . Their robust good sense would not permit them to join a movement to embarrass their own employers merely to show their displeasure with the employers of other men. It was too unreasonable and absurd a performance that was asked of them, so only a relatively few responded . . . The sympathetic strike did not have the degree of support necessary to make it successful.

Reviewing, on April 17th, the course of the carmen's strike, the Philadelphia "Public Ledger" in an editorial, said:

The (general strike) effort failed, as it must have done in a reasonable American community and after that the carmen's strike resolved itself merely into a question of persistence.

These statements show that we are safe in concluding that the sympathetic strike failed because those who were expected to be influenced and impressed by the general strike were not in sym-

pathy with it, and were not convinced of anything except that it was a complete failure. This failure was due in part to lack of leadership and organization, but mainly, in the writer's opinion, to the belief on the part of the great majority of workers that the general strike was unjustified.

III

Lessons of great value may be drawn from the Philadelphia labor battle. One of these lessons is that no street railway company can, in any proper sense of the word, *win* a strike of its motormen and conductors, and for this reason, if for no other, such strikes should never occur. One hour's suspension of service on a system like that of the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company means a loss in fares alone of \$2300. The losses of a strike of ten days' duration would equal the amount of a cent-an-hour increase in wages for a year. When the indirect losses, the antagonisms engendered, and the disorganization and disturbed morale resulting from a strike are added to the money loss, it becomes evident that a street railway can only win a strike at a cost greater than the value of any victory to be obtained.

As it can not be expected, on the other hand, that street railways will follow a policy of successive surrenders in order to avoid strikes, some other line of action must be sought out. The remedy will be found in the improvement and readjustment of working conditions on street railways. The first step in this direction should be to overcome, or at least to counterbalance, the real or fancied objections to street railway service so as to make it permanently attractive to a better class of workers.

Motormen and conductors are at present held at a dead level of wages and opportunity, except on those systems where the sliding scale, depending upon length and efficiency of service, prevails. A few roads have tried with success a merit and demerit system, carrying with it a bonus, or increase of wages, for faithful and efficient service. This line of policy should be augmented by every means, such as sick relief, death benefits, and welfare work, tending to attract and hold good men in the service. Such a policy is the best insurance against strikes and the best assurance of better service. At the present time the men and the managing officials of large systems, and the small electric system is becoming rarer every day,

are so little acquainted that a good understanding and mutual confidence is impossible. The large number of men constantly entering the service only to leave it after a year or less greatly aggravates this evil. Not until a fairly permanent body of employes is maintained shall we be on the road to a peaceful and satisfactory era in the street railway world.